Approved for Release: 2018/10/01 C05562014

ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE A-1

WASHINGTON TIMES
16 June 1983

Argentina must wait to try Mike Townley

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For the space of maybe two minutes last month, Michael V. Townley, the convicted car-bombing assassin of former Chilean Ambassador Orlando Letelier and Ronni K. Moffitt, was a free man.

But no sooner was he handed his parole at an unnamed federal prison than U.S. marshals arrested him, this time for almost certain extradition to Argentina. There, the 41-year-old American expatriate and former hit-man for the Chilean military intelligence service, will be tried for putting out the contract for the 1974 murder of Chilean Gen. Carlos Prats and his wife.

The next act in the cloak-and-dagger life of Mike Townley was to have taken place in Alexandria federal court tomorrow, but will be delayed until July because the death of Judge Oren Lewis has the courthouse closed for the day. Townley, after five years and one month in U.S. prisons, now faces a life-sentence in Argentina for the murder of the Prats family.

But Townley, some officials believe, might well be safer in an Argentine jail than he would be walking any street in the United States where the anti-Castro Omega 7 organization would kill him on sight, or in Chile, where he is hated by former members of the DINA intelligence organization for unveiling so much about those violent organizations.

He is now more than a convicted assassin. Mike Townley, the electronics wizard who became an expert maker of bombs, has become a pawn in the foreign policy relationships of the United States with Argentina and Chile.

Why is Argentina, where thousands disappeared in the so-called "dirty war" waged by the military government against the leftist Montoneros and perceived opponents of any stripe, so interested in trying a Chilean assassin for murdering a Chilean general?

U.S. officials believe there are three reasons:

- There is bad blood and considerable tension between the two neighboring Southern Cone republics. Chile fears a sudden Argentine attack, as was made on the Falkland Islands, so much so that the armed forces of both countries went on red alert last week when an Argentine helicopter made a forced landing on the Chilean side of the Andes. Argentina would like to see Chile further embarrassed on human rights grounds.
- The Argentine military, about to give up power in October elections that will bring the Peronists back into control, are well aware that Prats and his wife were killed when the Peronists were running things in Buenos Aires in 1974. The present government wants no new Peronist president in a position to go seeking culprits for the *desaparecidos* (disappeared ones) now that the internal strife has ceased.
- Argentina places a high priority on receiving U.S. certification that it is observing new and high standards of human rights, and the public trial of a Chileanized American would help ensure that the Reagan administration issues the certification after the October elections.

Townley seems to have more strikes against him than anyone imaginable.

He went to Chile as a teen-ager with his family and became an ardent supporter of the military government which had taken over in the revolution of 1973.

He and his wife, Mariana, became agents of DINA. His assignments became Letelier, killed in Washington in September 1976; Prats, slain in Buenos Aires; the failed effort to kill exiled politicians Volodia Teitelboim and Carlos Altamirano in Mexico in 1975; and a gunshot attack on politician Bernardo Leighton in Italy the same year.

When the Washington Star printed Townley's photo, enabling the FBI to discover his identity, Chilean President Augusto Pinochet ordered him handed over to the United States.

Townley, either feeling betrayed or acting on orders, made a deal with the prosecutors that laid bare much about the heinous work of DINA — now disbanded — and about the Cuban Omega 7 group which had helped him place and ignite the bomb under Letelier's car here.

In return for his cooperation, the prosecutors agreed to ask that he be set free after serving 40 months, but U.S. District Judge Barrington Parker said this deal was not binding. His release came on May 6, in the undisclosed prison where Townley was entering the sixth year of his imprisonment. The new arrest swiftly followed.

Townley has lost the use of his own name, because federal authorities gave him a new identity under the witness protection program to save him from assassination in jail. He also has lost his wife in what sources describe as a separation. She was last reported in Spain.

There is every reason to expect U.S. Magistrate Ross Grimsley in Alexandria to order his extradition to Argentina, based on the evidence. The finding will be reviewed by a federal judge and if extradition is upheld, Townley's attorneys can appeal to the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals. The last step is for Secretary of State George P. Shultz to give his approval of the extradition.

No later than six months from now Mike Townley will be on his way back to a culture he long ago found preferable to his own American background.

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